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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the founding of the Reggio Emilia preschool system in Reggio, Italy, in 1945 and its development through the 1950s to the present. Since the schools themselves were actually founded and constructed by parents in the aftermath of World War II, the Reggio Emilia approach has always emphasized parent involvement in every facet of its activities. The involvement of parents and community members is formally structured and integrated into the organization of the education department. Each site has classroom parent groups and a school parent group, while the entire system is run by a municipal management council composed of parents, staff, and community members. Educators in the United States could learn a good deal from this system, which puts parents at the center of the decision-making process. Rather than being the recipients of some government program, parents are empowered leaders in control of their children's schools and their children's future. (MDM)

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PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Observations of the Reggio Emilia Schools

Beverly Langford-Thomas

DURING OUR VISIT TO THE REGGIO SCHOOLS, AFTER OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION, IT WAS THE COLLECTIVE WISDOM OF OUR DELEGATION THAT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE SCHOOLS WAS BASED ON THE INFRASTRUCTURE WHICH WAS IN PLACE TO SUPPORT THE WORK OF EDUCATION IN THIS PROVINCE. WE FELT THAT , IN OUR WORK IN THE USA, WE HAD SEEN HIGH QUALITY ENVIRONMENTS; AND, AS I AM GOING TO SHARE IN A MINUTE, EFFECTIVE PARENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES. THE DIFFERENCE IN WHAT WE HAD SEEN STATESIDE AND WHAT WE WERE LEARNING ABOUT WAS A DISTINCTION BETWEEN CONCEPTUALIZATION AND CODIFICATION. THIS IS TRULY THE CASE FOR THE REGGIO PEDAGOGY; IT IS ALSO TRUE IN THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITY IN THE PROCESS.

HISTORICALLY PARENTS OF REGGIO ESTABLISHED NEW SCHOOL AT THE CONCLUSION OF WORLD WAR II. (REGGIO CITIZENS WERE PARTISANS DURING THE WAR, FIGHTING THE FASCIST NAZI SCOURGE.) IN THE REGGIO LITERATURE, WE ARE TOLD THAT ONE SUCH SCHOOL WAS ESTABLISHED WITHIN FIVE DAYS AFTER THE CONCLUSION OF THE WAR. THE PARENTS VIRTUALLY CONSTRUCTED THE SCHOOLS FROM THE RUBBLE OF THE WAR. WHEN THESE FOUNDING PARENTS BEGAN TO HAVE DIFFICULTY OPERATING THE SCHOOLS, THEY JOINED FORCES WITH THE MOVEMENT OF COOPERATIVE TEACHERS. (THE EMILIA - ROMAGNA ECONOMY EVEN TODAY IS BASED ON A SYSTEM OF COOPERATIVES EVEN THOUGH THERE IS PRIVATIZATION OF INDUSTRY.)

IN THE LATE FIFTIES AND EARLY SIXTIES A MOVEMENT DEVELOPED CONSISTING OF ITALIAN WORKERS AND WOMEN WHICH ULTIMATELY LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST MUNICIPAL SCHOOL IN 1963. THE MOVEMENT DEVELOPED IN RESPONSE TO THE WORKERS DESIRE TO CREATE MORE EQUALITY AMONG THE SOCIAL CLASSES. IT WAS A CLASS STRUGGLE IN THAT THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR DID NOT HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITY AS DID CHILDREN OF THE WEALTHY (SOUNDS FAMILIAR - N"EST PAS, OH WRONG LANGUAGE.

AFTER THE WAR THERE WAS AN INCREASE OF COURSE IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN, AND THERE WAS A DECREASE IN FAMILY SIZE WHICH IS STILL EVIDENCED TODAY. THERE WAS ALSO AN OVERRIDING BELIEF IN MATERNAL AND CHILD RIGHTS. SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS HAS BEEN THEREBY ENGENDERED BOTH AS A RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL NEED FOR CHILD CARE AND THE NEED FOR CHILDREN TO INTERACT WITH OTHER CHILDREN AND ADULTS.

THIS COLLECTIVE ACTION OF THE WOMEN'S AND WORKER'S MOVEMENT RESULTED IN THE ESTABLISHMENT IN 1968 OF THE LAW WHICH CONCRETIZED THE EXISTENCE OF SCHOOLS FOR ALL CHILDREN, AGES 3-6. THE LAW FURTHER STATED THAT THESE SCHOOLS WOULD BE FREE FOR ALL CHILDREN.

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IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT THESE SCHOOLS WERE DEVELOPED IN THE CONTEXT OF A SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT. THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT HAS GAINED INCREASING MOMENTUM IN THE 1970'S AND DURING OUR VISIT, EVERY OFFICIAL, THE MAYOR, THE MUNICIPAL COUNCILPERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATION, TWO REGIONAL OFFICIALS; THE COUNCILLOR FOR LABOR, EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING, AND THE COUNCILLOR FOR TOWN PLANNING, CULTURE AND CULTURAL ASSETS WERE ALL WOMEN WHO WERE ELECTED TO THEIR POSITIONS.

PARENTS WERE DEEPLY INVOLVED IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THESE SCHOOLS AND AS OPERATED TODAY, ARE CO-MANAGERS OF THE PROGRAMS. GIVEN THE POLITICAL UNDERPINNINGS, THE PARENTS OF REGGIO ARE INVOLVED BEYOND OUR NORMAL EXPECTATIONS. IT DOES, HOWEVER, HAVE SOME FAMILIARITY, PARTICULARLY FOR THOSE OF US WHO WORKED IN ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMS, IN THE CONCEPT OF MAXIMUM FEASIBLE PARTICIPATION OF THE POOR. (Of course today, Reggio is not poor, but has the 4th highest per capita income in Italy.) A SIMILAR CONCEPT ALSO PLAYED OUT IN THIS COUNTRY IN THE FREEDOM SCHOOLS IN MISSISSIPPI WHICH INCIDENTALLY OR COINCIDENTALLY AROSE DURING THE SAME TIME PERIOD (1964).

WHILE WE DID NOT SEE PARENTS WORKING IN THE SCHOOLS, THE EVIDENCE OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT WAS SEEN THROUGHOUT - IN PHOTOGRAPHS OF PARENT WORKGROUPS, IN EQUIPMENT CONSTRUCTED BY PARENTS FOR USE IN THE CLASSROOMS, IN THE CREATIVE USE OF MATERIALS COLLECTED BY CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS AND WE ALSO VISITED ONE SITE WHERE PARENTS PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE ACQUISITION OF THE FACILITY.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS IS FORMALLY STRUCTURED AND INTEGRATED INTO THE ORGANIZATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT. THIS, TOO, HAS A FAMILIAR RING.

EACH SITE HAS CLASSROOM PARENT GROUPS, A SCHOOL PARENT GROUP AND THESE SITES ELECT BOTH PARENTS, STAFF AND COMMUNITY PERSONS TO SERVE ON A MUNICIPAL MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. ALL ISSUES RELATED TO SCHOOL OPERATION ARE WITHIN THE PERVIEW OF THIS COUNCIL.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITY IN REGGIO IS THE STORY OF A PEOPLE WHO HAVE EMPOWERED THEMSELVES SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY, AND POLITICALLY. THEY ARE NOT SIMPLY RECIPIENTS OF A PROGRAM; AND THEREFORE, THEY ARE NOT ALIENATED NOR OPPRESSED BY IT. THEY ARE THE CHOICE MAKERS.

IN CONCLUSION, IT IS MY FEELING THAT IT IS NOT OUT OF OUR REACH; WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY EACH DAY TO WORK WITH FAMILIES IN A WAY THAT DOES NOT ATTEMPT TO EDUCATE CHILDREN OUTSIDE OF THEIR FAMILIES', SOCIAL, POLITICAL OR CULTURAL MILIEU. THE LESSON OF REGGIO IS THAT WE MUST DEVELOP EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS THAT HONESTLY SEEK TO PUT THE POWER IN THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE.

For Additional Reading:

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